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Interview: Daniel Kleinman

Emily Caston

Daniel "Danny" Kleinman is recognised as one of advertising's most established directors. After directing his first music video in 1983, Kleinman pioneered the use of many special effects in post-production. In all, he directed more than 100 videos in the 1980s for artists such as ZZ Top, Fleetwood Mac, Prince, and Madonna. From the 1990s he has directed commercials for clients such as Guinness, X-Box, Chrysler, Johnnie Walker, Sony and Audi. His skills in directing comedy and dialogue led to award-winning work for Boddingtons, John Smiths, Super Noodles, Durex and John West, and he has won multiple awards at Cannes, D&AD, the New York One Show, British Arrows, Clio, Creative Circle, and the Midsummer Awards amongst others. Since 1995, Kleinman has created eight title sequences for the James Bond films.

Interview conducted on 8 March 2022 on Zoom; transcribed and edited by Emily Caston.

Before I went to Hornsey College of Art, I went to a run-of-the-mill boys' grammar school which didn't encourage the arts at all, but my family was artistic so my interests were supported at home. I remember my headmaster taking me into his room and saying, "There are a few things we don't encourage here: one is drama, and the other is art." So, I did my A-levels in one year rather than two years, just so I could get out of that school a soon as possible.

Hornsey was just brilliant. I already knew that I wanted to paint but there I also got into printmaking and illustration. I was in a band, playing in pubs in the evenings. During the day I'd do my foundation course. If I wasn't playing with my band in the evening, I'd do an evening class in etching. I was very motivated to draw. All that led me towards illustration, and I went onto do graphics and printmaking. Foundation gives you a little bit of taste of everything. I loved it and I still dream about going off to art school. I wish I could go back and do it again.

The mixture of working as an illustrator and being into music led me to music videos. I began being involved with them through Steve Barron.[1] We'd been friends as teenagers. He set up Limelight Films—originally it was called Steploes.[2] At that time, he was working at Samuelsons camera company, going out on jobs as a clapper loader.[3] At the weekend he'd "borrow" a camera from Samuelsons. One of his first extramural music film projects was to film my band playing at Hampstead Town Hall. He went on to create many classic music videos for groups who, unlike us, were actually famous.

Initially I worked with Steve. He had directorial expertise as he'd been on big films like *Superman* [Richard Donner, 1978] as a loader, and he'd come from a family in the film business. But he hadn't gone through art school and at the time he asked for my help to come up with concepts. He was good at filming live bands, but as music videos became more

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conceptual in the late 1970s and 80s, I continued to help him out with the ideas and storyboards. After a while he definitely didn't need my help with ideas anymore.

Then I began directing music videos on my own. Steve's sister Siobhan [Barron], with whom he'd started Limelight, eventually got me a video to direct myself. I jumped in feet first. My sensibilities were more art school and more graphic than most other directors, so my work felt different.

I was interested in FX very early on. I collaborated mainly with David Yardley who was one of the very first video rather than film editors. He worked at Visions and at a very early Framestore.[4] With David I did *Hyperactive* [Thomas Dolby, 1984]. Editing video was a very laborious process but it allowed some effects to be created more easily than on film, such as layering pictures together. At that time editing with videotape, you'd have one tape, a second tape and a third. I'd play pictures from tape 1 and 2, mix them together and record that onto tape 3 and so on.

I also worked with a film, rather than video, editor called John Mister. Editing on film was still very basic, to cut you'd stick the film together using Sellotape, to dissolve you'd make a mark with a wax pencil on the film. Video editing was done by pushing buttons and loading and unloading tapes. My first music video was shot and edited at MPC.[5] I think it was one of first videos made there using early video technology. The song was called *Crushed by the Wheels of Industry* by Heaven 17. Those videos looked very "video", not filmic, in picture quality. Material shot on video in those days looked really crap, rather flat and electronic, synonymous with cheap TV. A look which film purists would be very snooty about. Today, you can't tell the difference between digital imagery and film. I concentrated on music videos for a few years, experimenting with video, film and different techniques as new machines and technology was introduced.

The Bond title sequences were offered to me because of my work in music videos. In the beginning there were very few outlets for music videos. But once MTV started in the USA and came to the UK, music videos were being shown all the time, often on heavy rotation, not just projected in pubs but on TV in people's living rooms. Consequently, feature film companies wanted to use music videos to advertise the films. I directed quite a lot of those promotional films. They had to include clips of the feature films along with footage of the band. One that I did was for Gladys Knight's *Licenced to Kill*, used to promote the James Bond feature film *Licensed to Kill* [1989].

When Maurice Binder, who had been creating the Bond title sequences, died, someone must have remembered that I had made the Gladys Knight music video. It had been a bit title-sequence-esque. I had shot on film transferred to video and then created the effects in an online video editing suite. Maurice up to that time had still been using film opticals, but video technology had moved on, making film opticals look a bit outdated. So, I was asked if I'd be interested in creating the title sequence for the film *GoldenEye* [Martin Campbell, 1995].

In the feature film industry at that time, optical effects were still the main way to create special effects. I was creating FX with analogue video technology and some of the very earliest digital machines just starting to be practical to use. Maurice Binder was a master at film opticals, basically projecting film onto a screen, then projecting another film on top of it, and then then refilming it, making inter-negs a slow and laborious process. It was also at a transition point between analogue and digital back then. We'd do the offline on u-matic, having

transferred the film via telecine machine onto tape. It was slow if you were bouncing one u-matic to another to retape it, and restrictive because if you were five or six generations down the original image would get degraded as you were rerecording it so many times. So, I was limited by the number of layers I could put together. But it was very exciting because it was like creating a graphic picture or painting a collage. Even though, today, video looks clunky, back then the work I was doing felt more modern than the optical effects that others were using at the time. The sea change was when the digital machines came online, although they could only cope with very short sequences and were very, very slow.

By the late 80s, I'd started to run out of love with the music videos. I stopped liking the music. I'd made music, and liked music, during the mid-70s and onwards, but, by the late 80s, I'd ended up making videos for bands I would pay money not to listen to. I'd learnt my filmmaking craft creating music videos, but once I got the hang of it, I thought, "Do I really want to make another for something I don't really like?" For instance, I filmed a live concert for Van Halen called "Live Without a Net" from which they took their music video *Best of Both Worlds* [1986]. I shot live performance over two or three nights with twelve cameras. Each night they played on stage for over two hours; that's about two days' worth of rushes of a heavy metal band. I had to listen to them for weeks and it I found it very challenging. I thought, "If I don't hear another heavy metal drum solo again in my entire life I will be so pleased." I had to do something else.

I started doing commercials at a good time. Those "Wild West" days of music videos were coming to an end. The bands were starting to realise that their $200,000 video budgets were coming from their record sales and personal back end, not the record label's money, so, reasonably, they stopped wanting to pay for it. Budgets started to decrease. The marketing value was also starting to change. In the early days the labels knew little about filmmaking. But then they began to feel that getting a load of British film directors to come to LA and run about with thousands of dollars making mad videos wasn't going to sell stuff; instead, they thought it was getting the band to look good and be seen playing the music that would sell the records, so the videos became more generic.

Music videos were my route into commercials. I'd been approached to do quite a few commercials that were based on ideas that I'd done in music videos that the creatives had seen on MTV. Advertising creatives are like magpies: they'll pick up things from all different other places. On MTV they'd might see an interesting technique and think, "I could use that for a Weetabix commercial." In the 80s, I was getting asked by agency creatives to pitch and direct my own music video ideas back again to them for commercials. In those circumstances you think, "Well of course I want to do it: I don't want somebody else to get the credit and get paid for doing my idea; I want to do it myself." Music videos were also where I learned my craft. In those days you got pretty free hand to create stuff, so music videos were my "film school", which was fantastic.

The production company I was in, Limelight, set up a commercials division. If you're a director specialising in music videos at a company which has just started producing commercials, you want to try it. Plus, if a TV commercial script came in for one of the advertising directors, and that director wasn't available to shoot on those dates, the production company would try and switch it to one of their other directors. They wouldn't want to lose the business. Limelight also began doing features. Production companies were realising that there were diminishing returns from only producing music videos. They had to do other things, like

feature films or advertising. Working Title, for instance, began by producing music videos but then moved into feature films.[6]

From the 90s onwards, I was almost exclusively directing commercials. I avoided getting pigeonholed, in other words, known for only doing one genre of commercials, probably because of my experimental background in music videos. That really helped me. It meant I could direct both comedy as well as epic films. BBH did a lot of epic work.[7] I directed a lot of big filmic things like Johnnie Walker ["Fish", BBH, 2003], which had lots of people swimming under water, swimming like dolphins, and trees walking across landscapes.

I also directed a lot of comedy work. I did the first ever commercials for a British agency, Mother, that started doing innovative work in the 90s: Supernoodles, for instance, with a lot of comedy actors ("Shirt", "Race", "Selfish", Mother, 1997).[8] The US didn't do humour very well in the late 90s and early 2000s, in my opinion, but Britain did, and Mother especially. Humour is one of the strengths of British work. I did a lot of comedy with a creative called Paul Silburn which won many awards, I directed the Peter Kay John Smiths ads ["No Nonsense", TBWA, 2005]. That campaign had originally run with Jack Dee ["No Nonsense", BMP DDP, 1992–1994]. They were good fun, quite simple set ups, it was just a case of having a comedy ear and getting the best out of actors like Jack or Peter. The catchphrases, like "top bombing", became part of life, were used as newspaper headlines and even in Parliament. Then I did the John West Salmon commercial with a fisherman fighting a bear ["Bear", Leo Burnett, 2000]. I also worked a lot with Melanie Sykes and Boddingtons.

Even back in the early 2000s doing special VX work was still incredibly laborious and difficult, but I enjoyed doing it because it was a challenge, and it was my background. I've worked with most of the larger post houses; The Mill, MPC, but predominantly Framestore.[9] You build up a relationship with people in the post houses when you work with them on many jobs. Back in music video days, I worked at Framestore when it was still just a couple of rooms in Soho; I'd be sitting with an editor in one of those rooms and we'd be creating the work together in an "online" session (it was still analogue back then). I'm still very connected to Framestore London and they are still a great team, but it's all changed.

A lot of the post houses now are big international companies and post is losing its personal touch. Nowadays, you don't sit in the room with one person doing the SFX, the work gets piped off to people in different countries across the world. Some people will be matting in Korea, other stuff will get sent to LA and all the different elements of what you do are worked on by people in different rooms. It looks a bit like galley slaves when you physically go into the post houses now, with the number of people behind their screens. Post is far more sophisticated~~,~~ but it's no longer that personal interaction between yourself and a single crafts person/editor.

Limelight was Steve's company and its super big heyday of the 80s and early 90s was coming to an end. Steve got fed up with it, and was moving onto big TV series and features. He didn't want to run Limelight any more so he asked me if I wanted to do it. At that point, the company only existed in London—it was just me and John Lloyd, one of the most famous TV producers of all time. So, I, laughingly, became John Lloyd's boss and we changed the company's name to Spectre [in 1998]. It lasted for a while and was very successful.

I then joined forces with Jeff Stark's Stark Films to make us into a bigger company called Large [in 2003]. Very unfortunately, we hit a recession period and had too many

overheads, so we closed it down. I seemed to do things at the wrong time. When we were small, it was the massive companies doing well. So, I said, we need a lot of scale and get massive. As soon as we got massive and got scale, the recession hit. I'm not a great businessman.

Then I started Kleinman productions with my producer Johnnie Frankel [in 2004]. I did more jobs in the two or three years we had Kleinman than I'd ever done. It was great, very successful, but a company relying on just one director was a lot of pressure and a bit boring. Johnnie and I decided to bring in a few more directors, and that's when Ringan came in.

When Ringan Ledwidge joined in 2006, we changed the name to Rattling Stick. He closed his previous company, Small Family Business, because he wanted a company that could be sustained when he was off making features—he was shooting *Gone* [2007] at that time.[10]

The ethos of our company came from my learning experience. The demise of Limelight came about because it expanded too quickly, diversified too quickly and set up into many countries too quickly and became an unmanageable behemoth. On the other hand, Kleinman Productions had been too small.

The idea was to make Rattling Stick a boutique, being very particular about the directors we took on, never having directors who weren't working. If you have a roster with lots of directors not working it causes discontent and it's a downer for the company; you want people working so it's creative and busy.

We also wanted to keep our directors at a high level, being selective about what work we took on. We might not be the cheapest, but if you want the best, ours is the company you come to. If you look at Ringan's work, it showed that our production company put the money on the screen. There are companies with big offices and big overheads who need every penny of profit out of a client's budget, for their own overhead. We don't do that, and never wanted to. Ringan was a big part of this. That was our USP.

Ours is a fashion business. You have your time in the sun. Mine has lasted twenty–thirty years, I was lucky, but I'm no longer considered the exciting young thing, I'm the exciting old thing, something not so trendy. Ringan was the hot young thing in the 2000s, he was up and coming: the most wanted director in the world. I was a safe pair of hands. I like to know everybody that's in the company. I like them all to be friends. I need to be in a nice atmosphere. Neither Ringan or I were the kind of directors who thrive on tension, screaming at people and being horrible. We were all about encouraging people, making the work environment pleasant and enjoyable. We've encouraged people to go from being runners to being producers and cherish our teams. Ringan and I were very simpatico in that way.

The days of the auteur are pretty much gone. You may get the odd job where the agency or client says, "We want you, the director, to be the main force here." But now more often the creative process is done by committee. This is partly a knock-on effect of various recessions. Companies have started to feel they need their advertising to work harder for them, and to achieve that they need to be more in control of it. That's meant there's more testing now. In the old days, I'd do an edit without the agency or client's involvement at all until the end when they'd come in and say, "That's great, can you just make the logo longer?" Now, every shot and every frame are analysed. There is a hierarchy of decision-making. The end result is that everything becomes more generic, less adventurous, and break through unique work more

difficult to achieve. The directors who do have a vision are fewer and far between, or at least the ones who are allowed to exercise their vision are.

Economy has also meant that commercials have to be made to be shown all over the world. In the past, clients would make specific commercials for different territories. Making one for all territories dumbs down the quality because the commercial needs to work in different cultures. I've done jobs where different cuts have different actors for each territory. For the US version I've had one actor, but for the Indian territory I had to shoot it again with an actor from that territory. The American arm of a company might instigate one particular ad, then the Singapore or European arm, which is slightly autonomous within the bigger company, will be given the choice but to buy into it. If they do, they may have different requirements. You might find the European, American and Singapore clients can't agree. It then becomes very political. It can be tough to keep the vision of good creative work. You have to really fight.

Plus, there are many different formats needed now out of a single commercial: the TikTok and YouTube formats, for instance. This also makes it difficult. Sometimes you must push back, sit down, talk it through, and explain your thinking. People won't necessarily accept your opinion, but they are in fact paying you for your opinion, so you need talk the process through and back up your decisions with reasons.

The 60-second commercial is not dead but is no longer the force that it was. When you see a great 60-second commercial it's *great*. People have a shared experience of it. The 60-second commercial was the one that we all saw together and talked about in the pub. When home video came in and people started to record TV, you thought they would fast forward through the advertisements, but they used video to record the good commercials to watch again later. If you made a good ad, people were entertained by it. That experience of watching something together is rare now; you don't get it except perhaps at Christmas with the Christmas ads or The Superbowl in the USA.[11] Apart from these special events, the era of big ads is waning.

There's a lot of nervousness about what you can and can't do and say now. The atmosphere is tricky if you want to be edgy or provocative. Satire is controversial. Clients and agencies are rarely guiding or leading the zeitgeist. Companies wouldn't say there are no CFCs in their products unless it makes them money to say so. I doubt altruism plays a part here. It's business. But the best commercials and advertising are always slightly forward-thinking: they are predicting what the next zeitgeist might be; or they provoke by going against whatever's in fashion now. Sadly, a lot of advertising isn't looking ahead: it's jumping on the bandwagon with what's "now".

Today's technology and access is amazing. When I started I'd have been gobsmacked by what you can do on a phone and laptop. You can create effects without needing to go to expensive editing facilities anymore. But easy access to great effects isn't of any use unless you've got a really great idea for these tools. It's all about the idea. You have to find out what makes your work fresh and different from anyone else's.

Branded content it seems was a red herring. The idea was that companies would make little feature films which featured their brand. But it turned out nobody was interested in watching commercially tendentious material. What the viewer will always be interested in is a great idea that wants to share with a friend and to "own".

An agency is a buffer between production and the client. Clients can be difficult and need a lot of attention, understandably, as they are paying and are not filmmakers. The account director's job is to defend the creative work of the agency and the production company director. It isn't to be the client's bully boy, although that's effectively what a lot of them now have been come recently: the hitman for the client.

In earlier times, an agency might say to their client, "This might be counterintuitive for your brand, but you need this", and they'd be trusted, and often would be right. But today it's like the client is a patient going to the doctor with a broken arm. The doctor says, "Your arm is broken, let me fix it by putting it in a sling." The client says, "No, I want you to put my foot in a sling, not my arm." Because the doctor is nervous, she says, "Ok, I'll put your foot in a sling if that's what you want." The job of ad agencies is to say to clients, "This is what you need." Good work is still being made, but it's not easy.

Advertising will recover from this generic phase. It will change, because advertising is a fashion business: good creative people react against what the generation before them has done, they rebel against what's been going on for the last few years. New ideas and fashions will come along and start making things edgy again.

Young people should make commercials. It's possible to create a piece of work that can be seen more than a feature film. If it's successful it'll be shown all around the world. Commercials may not be art, but they can be a loved talisman of a time. People remember popular culture as they do the sweets they loved when they were kids. Commercials are a way for the creative to express themselves, entertain people, and, if you can get a reasonable budget, spend someone else's money doing that and oil the wheels of industry, not be crushed by it as I predicted in my first ever attempt at directing.

Notes

[1] Irish-British director of such music videos as *Billie Jean* (Michael Jackson, 1982).

[2] Set up in 1979 by Barron, his sister, Siobhan Barron, and Adam Whittaker, Limelight was a music video production company until 1987 when it set up a division headed by Harry Rankin to produce commercials, and subsequently opened offices in New York and Los Angeles before closing its doors in 1998.

[3] Samuelsons was established in 1954 by Sir Sydney Samuelson (Greg).

[4] Another Soho post-production company founded in 1986 to service commercials and music videos, but which subsequently went on to deploy the SFX technologies developed in those sectors for mainstream film and television and now has offices across the UK, USA, Canada, India and Australia.

[5] Visions was another Soho postproduction company founded in 1986 to service commercials and music videos, but which subsequently went on to deploy the SFX technologies developed in those sectors for mainstream film and television and now has offices across the UK, USA, Canada, India and Australia. MPC was established by Mike Luckwell in 1970, starting as a production company producing TV commercials and in 1974 the studio began moving into

video, acquiring broadcast standard video recorders and TV cameras; by 1983 it was known for postproduction and visual effects for the advertising and feature film industries. Now part of Technicolor SA, MPC is one of the leading visual effects companies with offices worldwide.
[6] Founded in 1983 from the music video cluster of production companies in Soho, Working Title grew to become the UK's leading theatrical film producer and is today owned by Universal (Caston).

[7] Bartle Bogle Hegarty (BBH) was founded in 1982 by John Bartle, Nigel Bogle and John Hegarty in the UK.

[8] Mother was founded in 1996 as a UK independent agency.

[9] Global post-production and FX company based in Soho London with offices around the world, The Mill was founded in 1990 by Robin Shenfield and Pat Joseph. Starting as a visual effects house for the advertising industry, it was the first VFX company in Europe to use exclusively digital methods.

[10] Founded in 2003 by Ledwidge and his producer Sally Humphries, A Small Family Business operated until 2006.

[11] The Super Bowl is the annual playoff championship game of the National Football League. Super Bowl commercials, colloquially known as Super Bowl ads, are high-profile television commercials which become a cultural phenomenon. Well known for their cinematographic quality, unpredictability, surreal humour, and use of special effects, the commercials are produced for slots booked by brands to secure exposure to the game's extremely high US television viewership and wide demographic reach.

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——, director. "No Nonsense" campaign feat. Peter Kay / John Smith / TBWA, 2005.

——, director. "Shirt", "Race", "Selfish." Batchelors Supernoodles / Mother, 1997.

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——, director. Title Sequence, *GoldenEye*, directed by Martin Campbell. MGM/ UA, 1995.

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